

GOOD STORIES FOR CHILDREN

By Walt McDougall

The Curious Story of Bertha Walton, Whom a Witch Turned Into a Snake

JACK WALTON was a little boy who lived with his sister Bertha in a ramshackle, tumble-down, old house that no one would rent, it had such a leaky roof and a damp cellar and was so full of mice and rats.

They had no parents and Jack sold papers to get food for the two, but he rarely made enough to enable them to have two meals a day at the best. They were starved-looking and miserable indeed. But they had happy dispositions and somehow, in spite of their poverty, managed to be pretty jolly, except when nearly starved.

Jack was especially kind and obliging, letting out of his way to do a service to others and many a nickel he picked up here and there because of his willingness to help others, but curiously enough, this very willingness to oblige caused all the trouble that afterward came to both of them. They had managed to struggle through the bitter cold winter, although it is hard to see how they did it, and spring was coming. Even in the dirty streets of the city, down in the narrow alleys, something seemed to breathe an air of coming flowers and grass and birds to those who rarely saw any of these things, and even while the cold rain was falling and the sharp wind of April was blowing the buds on the few sickly-looking trees came pushing forth as though they felt sure that it was time to break into leaf. The hoarse sparrows on the housetops and gutters were more hoarse than ever, a sure sign of spring, and more organ grinders and brass bands were seen in the streets, a surer sign than any.

One day as Jack was going at daybreak (that was the time he had to start out for his papers) he saw a great wagon loaded with all sorts of beautiful flowers going past, and as he gazed at the flowers with a great wish to have some to take to Bertha, one fell into the street. He ran and picked it up quickly.

It was a great red rose, tightly closed as if it had not waked up yet, for it was still quite dark. He ran back to the house they called home and awoke Bertha. When she saw the lovely rose she just gasped with pleasure and seized it eagerly. She plucked her nose into its petals and drew in a breath of its fragrance.

"These roses are worth a dollar apiece," said Jack, "I saw the price marked on a card in a window on some just like them. Shall we try to sell this one?"

"Never!" That would be a shame. The first one we ever had! No, I will put it in a tomato can full of dirt, and maybe it will grow," replied Bertha—for that was all she knew about flowers. As she held it to her face she felt its petals slowly unfolding against her cheek, and, looking into its deep crimson heart, she saw something that made her jump in astonishment.

Jack looked also, and saw in the centre of the flower a tiny figure. It was a little maiden, dressed in the flimsiest sort of shimmering attire, like a dew-sprinkled spider's web, lying asleep in the heart of the rose; but as they gazed she opened her blue eyes and looked up at them. "I declare, it's a fairy!" cried Bertha. "I am sure of it!"

The Fairy Cereals.

"Looks like one," said Jack; "but I always thought there wasn't any."

"Are you a fairy?" asked Bertha.

"Yes," replied the tiny creature in a faint voice. "I am the fairy Cereals."

"Hoary!" cried Jack. "We've got a real fairy! What luck!"

"Where am I?" asked Cereals, trying to sit up, but falling back. "Oh, tell me, where am I?"

Jack told her where he had found her, in a few words, for he had expected to see her fly away at once, as he had heard fairies will always do.

"Oh, horrors! Am I in a city? Then, indeed, I am undone!" cried the fairy. She began to weep bitterly.

"What is the matter?" said Bertha.

"We will not harm you. Are you hungry?" She asked this because she herself only cried when starved.

"Yes," replied Cereals; "I am faint with hunger, and the knowledge that I am in a dreadful city unnerves me so that I can't control myself."

"Why do you object to being in a city?" asked Jack.

"All a fairy's power leaves her if she gets into a town," said Cereals. "It is bad enough to cross over a stream. That is fatal to a fairy's power, but it is far worse to be in among houses of men. No wonder that I felt so weak. I went to sleep in this rose of mine in the beautiful garden of Heishaus, the florist, where we spend the winter, and now I awake here!"

"Well, wish yourself back again," said Jack.

"It would do to good. I am powerless here," she said, weeping again.

"Well, if that's the case, I will carry you back," said Jack.

"It's a long way from here," said Cereals sadly, "and you never could walk."

"Well, if you'll wait until I sell my papers I'll manage to get car fare," he replied, "and then it will be easy. Meanwhile sister will try to scrape up something for you to eat."

"Perhaps I can find some honey in the rose," said the fairy, "and that will support me awhile." She examined the flower, and, sure enough, there, deep down in its centre, was plenty of sweet, pure honey, and then she smiled, for she knew she wouldn't starve. Jack hurried away, and somehow it seemed as if the fairy's power did help, for he sold more papers than ever before, and also found a dime in the gutter, so that, although he was late in getting home, he was very happy, for he knew that he was going to help a fairy, and he was sure it would be a great thing for him.

In the morning they took the rose, with Cereals inside of it, carefully, and for greater security wrapped it in paper and started for the railroad train. It was the first time they had ever been on a train, and they did not know what to do, but a policeman showed them where to buy tickets, and soon they were dashing toward the country, where the wide fields and great trees filled them with wonder.

They got out at Nepenthe Station, away out in the country, and found the florist's great garden filled with plants already in bloom, and here, as the fairy directed, they placed the rose just inside of the fence and went away.

"I wonder what she'll do for us," said Jack as they walked back to the station.

"I don't expect she'll do anything. I am glad she is home again, and that's enough," replied Bertha. "Anyway, we can say we've had a fairy."

"All the same," said Jack, "I just wish I'd struck her for a bag of dimes before we left."

Now the good little fairy was only trying the two, for she fully intended, after she got her powers back, to shower all sorts of good things upon them, but here comes the strange part of the story.

When they got back to town they walked along feeling sorry that they could not have remained in the beautiful country, and they met an old woman with a large bag. This was the old witch of Possum Hill, who was feared by all who knew her. She was a most hateful and venomous old hag, who was certain to do harm to all whom she met, and who hated all mankind, but especially all good and kindly children. These she followed and did all sorts of mean things to them.

Ordinarily she only played mean tricks upon people, such as making a farmer's horse run away and upset everything in his cart, making dogs howl or babies cry all night to annoy the neighbors, causing boys to be late at school by turning all the clocks back, making stones that boys threw go wrong and into windows and the like, but when she came across a really good and well-disposed boy or girl, who was always doing kind actions to others, she seemed to go into a perfect spasm of deadly spite, and she worked her very worst spells on them.

She was simply shaking with hate when she met the two children, but they thought it was only her old age, and they both felt sorry for her when they saw her trying to lift the great bag upon her back. She did this only to find out whether Jack would help her and thus reveal his kindly heart, and, of course, as soon as he saw how difficult the task was for such an old woman, he ran to her and said:

"Let me carry your bag, for I am strong and young."

"Thank you, my dear boy," the old witch replied. "You shall carry it and gladden my old heart, for I am weak and feeble. I have not far to go."

Jack lifted the bag, which was very heavy, and carried it for several blocks, when the witch thanked him and said:

"For this you will some day be rewarded, but I am too poor to pay you anything."

"I do not ask for pay," replied Jack; "I am glad to be able to help you."



THE OLD WOMAN WAS A WITCH.

root. I am glad you didn't touch it, dear brother."

Wasn't this a dreadful state of affairs? These they were, a boy and sister-snake and he didn't know what to feed her on or how to care for her, and you may be sure they talked a long time before they managed to decide what to do.

It seemed, however, that the snake never needed food, for Bertha became a girl in the morning and ate just as before. For some time they were very careful to conceal the condition of things for fear of the neighbors, but one day when it had rained for several days and Jack had sold very few papers they became very, very

should yield to this feeling and swallow a small boy in the midst of the exhibition, but all the same she was almost certain that it would happen if she kept on. She was glad to escape from the constant temptation.

The flowers and plants were now all advanced, butterflies were fluttering about among them, while the trees were filled with song birds, but they could see no sign of the forest's garden, although they searched for it carefully everywhere. They wandered on and on until they were in the very deepest woods where giant trees had raised their heads almost to the sky and where the deer came and peeped through

This, in fact, was what had occurred, for the fairy, although she couldn't help them in the city nor change Bertha back at night to a girl, had waited for them to come to the country and prepared this little house, and they had been led to it without knowing it. She was obliged to go far away to a great meeting of fairies, a sort of convention which is held every year to elect a queen, and as she herself expected to be elected, it was absolutely necessary for her to go, and so she couldn't be there to welcome them. In a little platter Bertha found a letter from Cereals telling them to make themselves at home and be as happy as possible until

strong. There was not a plant in all the woods, not a hidden cave, nor babbling brook, nor strange bird's nest, nor a wild animal's lair that they were not familiar with. Yet all this time not another human being had they ever met in the forest, so far away were they from the haunts of men.

Although, of course, at night Bertha always changed into a snake, even that was not as unpleasant as before, for she could now go out and satisfy her snake's appetite, and crawl about over the rocks in the darkness in search of snake's food, such as mice and rats, whenever she wished, instead of lying coiled up in the damp interior. Of course, in the morning she was dreadfully ashamed of eating these things, as any nice girl would be, and shuddered and turned sick when she thought of the large rat or nest of mice or fat owl or mole, which she had eaten with such relish the night before.

It is a dreadful thing to sit in the glad sunshine, with a basket of strawberries or cherries, in a nice, clean muslin dress, and think of crawling over slimy rocks in search of rats for a midnight supper. And this was the only drawback to Bertha's happiness.

Sometimes she thought in her exasperation that she would crawl over to the witch's house and seize the old woman herself, but she reflected that after all it might do no good, and that while the old witch lived her heart might soften, but if she were dead there would be no hope of ever lifting the spell. So she tried to be as happy as the circumstances would allow.

Just at this time, as she was sitting in front of the house, a very handsome young man appeared at the corner, accompanied by a little white dog, with red spots on his back. He started with surprise and then asked her name, after which he explained that he was the son of Heishaus, the florist, who was studying botany, and had wandered far into the forest.

Bertha invited him in and he remained until Jack came home, when in response to his inquiries, because he liked his looks, they told him their whole story. He asked Jack if he had kept the root of which Bertha had eaten, and Jack brought it to him at once.

"That is snake root!" he said as soon as he saw it. "I might have known it. It is a very rare root, indeed, and I wonder where the witch procured it, for even a botanist rarely ever sees it, for it only

"I'll find that out, too," said Bertha.

"If you can do that," said Bertha, "I'll be your friend for life."

"All right," said Tatters. "I'm off."

He left the house at once, and proceeded through the forest until he arrived at the cottage of the witch.

Here he sat around on the doorstep and began to howl in the most doleful manner, which soon caused the old witch to put her head out of the window and say, "Dog, dog, what is the matter with you?"

"Wow, wow," howled Tatters, "my old master, the wizard, is dead, and I'm lost in the woods. I want somebody to take care of me."

"What can you do?" said the old witch.

"I can bake and brew, and cook things."

"And make all the beds, and wash dishes too."

"Well, if you can do all that," said the witch, "I'll try you. I certainly need help about the house, for I'm getting too old and feeble to do anything myself."

So she went down, opened the door, and let him in, whereupon he dashed about, pretending to be overjoyed. The old witch was vastly pleased at securing Tatters' services, for she thought she could use him to work mischief against the children. And Tatters, seeing this, pretended to have a very sad disposition, so that in a few days he had had confined in him that she was a witch, and all her evil projects were laid before him, so that he could assist her.

He pretended to fall in with her wishes, and soon was on the very best of terms with her, for she thought Tatters was as bad as she was herself.

It is true that sometimes he had to go outside of the house to keep from laughing in her face, as she told him of the things she was going to do to Jack and Bertha, but generally he did not even waggle his tail when she laid her evil plans before him. One day, after they had become so well acquainted, he asked her, as if he merely wished to know from curiosity, how to change a snake into a girl, but the old witch looked very cunning and refused to answer. Another time, when she was feeling very jovial over some new wickedness she had thought of, he asked her in an offhand manner if she knew how to change a boy into a girl.

Now, the witch did not know that Bertha had been changed into a toad, was as she was, and without thinking she asked: "Was this toad ever a girl before?" And when Tatters replied "Yes," she added: "All they have to do to change that toad into a girl would be to skin her alive by moonlight and throw the skin into the fire."

Tatters managed to conceal his delight at this answer, for it was all he needed, although he did shudder a little to think of skinning poor Bertha alive. He was certain, however, that the witch had told him the true way to accomplish the change, and in about five minutes he managed to slip out on some pretext or other and ran swiftly back to the children's cottage, where he found Bertha in her toad's shape sitting on the damp stone steps, catching moths, beetles and other night-bugs by shooting out her tongue at them, which is the way frogs procure their food.

"The Witches' Fate."

"Where is my master the botanist?" he asked. "I have great news for him."

"He is in the house," said Bertha, "asleep, for it's too late for anything but frogs and toads to be about."

Then Tatters told her what he had learned from Mr. Heishaus in the morning, which Bertha did, of course, telling him that she was very willing to have her skin taken off, if he really thought it would accomplish the object desired.

Young Heishaus, while he was very much amazed at Tatters' cleverness, concluded that the witch's directions were very probably correct, and Jack agreed with him that the experiment was worth trying, although he said that he would not be so certain, perhaps, if it had been proposed to skin him. Meanwhile Tatters, snooping around as dogs will, discovered the remainder of the snake-root and hurried back to the witch's cottage with it in his mouth, for he was filled with a great desire to serve the witch as she had served Bertha. He remembered that he had left a large pot of soup simmering on the fire, and he was certain that it must be there still, for the old witch was too feeble to remove it. When he arrived at the house he slipped into the open doorway and hurried to the fireplace. There hung the pot over the fire, but there was very little soup in the pot. The witch heard him and called him, asking him to bring her something to eat, as she had had nothing since he had left her.

"In a minute!" answered Tatters, as he peeped the piece of snake-root into the soup and piled on some firewood to burn. Soon it was hot, and then boiling. Then he took a plateful up to the witch, who promptly ate it all.

"What is the matter with me?" she cried suddenly, as she felt herself changing. "I'm all of a quiver. I am sliding all over my bed! I am feeling very shaky!"

"You will be feeling very shaky soon, I think," said the dog, with a broad grin as he saw the old witch turning into a serpent, first her head and then her body being covered with scales, and then he ran off to the children to tell the good news.

The witch was changed into a small garter snake, for there wasn't much of the root left, you see, and then she crawled into the garden to try to bite some thing just to see if she was a poisonous snake, and there a big hawk saw her, swooped down and gobbled her up in a twinkling!

That night they skinned the toad, as the witch had directed, and although it hurt her like everything, Bertha never winced at all, but bore the pain like a brave girl. In two minutes she was restored to her own shape and never was a toad again.

Well, after awhile she married young Heishaus, and they still live there in the woods, but I never heard whether the fairy ever came again to see them or not, but in fact, they never tell me anything more, so I don't really know anything about it.

WALT McDUGALL

THE MONOGRAM PUZZLES

The monogram puzzles last week spelled the names of American birds. They were robin, partridge, bluejay, snipe, plover, eagle, woodcock and swallow.



THE CHILDREN OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD ALL CAME TO SEE THE BIG SNAKE.

Then the witch asked: "What in the world do you want most?"

"I'd like to see my sister happy all the time," Jack replied. Now this was just what she wanted to hear, to find out his dearest wish, and then hatefully make it impossible, for that was the kind of old witch she was. She turned to Bertha and hissed out:

"Be from now on happy!" Then she looked at her long root, like a parsnip, and added: "All I can give you is this. It will help make you a supper." Then she went around the corner into a yard and disappeared.

"It was kind of lucky for her that we came along, for that was an awful heavy bag, and she was a pretty old woman to carry such a load," said Jack, rubbing his shoulder.

"I don't like her looks," replied Bertha, "as girls can always do, she had seen something about it. The witch that had warned her. 'She had a bad eye and a wicked smile, and I am glad she's gone without doing us any harm.'"

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hungry, and Bertha suggested that he might get some money by giving a snake show. At first Jack objected, but she insisted, and he went out and told all the boys he met that he had a big snake in his cellar, and that it would cost five cents to see it. Every boy was eager, of course, to see the snake, and Jack took in more than a dollar the first night.

The next night hundreds of boys came to see the snake, but not many, for they were afraid of snakes. They took in several dollars. Bertha squirmed around and wriggled, while Jack played on a mouth organ, and all the audience was delighted, for it was the best show they had ever seen anywhere.

But the boys, instead of keeping the show a secret from the old people, as they promised, told their parents, and they told the policemen, who came next day to inquire into the matter. Of course, as they came in daylight they found no snake, and they went away angry at being fooled.

The next night many grown-up people came and also a newspaper reporter, who wrote all about the show in the paper, so that the policemen came again and declared that Jack had the snake hidden somewhere, but after making a careful search they had to go away again disappointed. This happened several times until Jack heard that the police were coming at night, for they had at last thought of that, and he determined to go away from town at once.

About 4 o'clock in the afternoon he bought tickets for Nepenthe Station, for he now determined to see the fairy Cereals to learn if she couldn't help him. Bertha was very glad to go, for she was very tired of being a show snake, as she was now determined to see the fairy Cereals to learn if she couldn't help him. Bertha was very glad to go, for she was very tired of being a show snake, as she was now determined to see the fairy Cereals to learn if she couldn't help him.

They went upstairs and found two beds and everything needed to make it a pleasant home for them, and it really seemed that it had been waiting for two children to come and take possession. It was far finer than anything they had ever possessed, indeed, and Bertha was wild with delight as she looked about and noted all the nice things.

In the rear of the cottage was a large garden just filled with strawberries, lettuce and other things that made her mouth water. All sorts of fruit trees, with their fruit already ripe, made a forest as far as she could see, pineapples, bananas, oranges, everything that she had seen on the fruit stands, but never could buy, were there in plenty, ready to pick, and Jack found that the woods were full of game, rabbits, partridges and deer, so that when he wished he could take the gun that hung on the wall and go hunting. In the pantry were all sorts of provisions in great variety and plenty, and when she saw them Bertha cried:

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